

“Sniper”, by Shashi Warriier, Harper Collins, (2000), Rs. 195/-.

“Mogambo khush hua” is a memorable line from Mr. India, a delightful film by Shekhar Kapur. Mogambo is, as is evident from the name, evil personified, the head honcho of the bad guys. He wants to destroy India in collusion with the “enemy” who supply him with arms, bombs and drugs. The country is reeling under Mogambo’s nefarious designs since he seems invincible and all-powerful. There comes our hero, Mr. India, a true patriot, who with the help of a device which makes him invisible, defeats Mogambo and saves our beloved nation.

The movie’s theme is not original. There have been umpteen Hindi movies before and since portraying the nexus between politicians, the cops and the bad guys, and lately our friendly neighborhood ISI. Typically, in these movies, the hero or his family are wronged by the bad guys. The hero tries all possible legitimate channels for redress, fails, gets frustrated and becomes a vigilante to get his revenge with the villains.

Shashi Warriier’s book is along similar lines. An army colonel, well known for his skills in tracking down and killing enemy infiltrators kills an Afghan mercenary in Kashmir. The dead man’s brother is after his life and follows him to Nagaland where the colonel has been posted. The colonel is a great leader, totally committed to his job and commands great respect from his juniors, amongst whom is a stereotypical Gurkha. The colonel is a loner, separated from his wife and very attached to his teenage daughter who lives in Kerala. The girl is tortured, raped and killed by an all-powerful bad guy, the “grey man”. The “grey man” controls everyone and has a network of informers and agents everywhere: in the police, amongst politicians, the bureaucracy and even in the hero’s house.

On hearing of his daughter’s death, the colonel is shattered. He comes to Kerala and tries to get the police to bring the murderers to book. Unsurprisingly, he is unsuccessful and the killers are now after his life. He goes back to Nagaland and after some time retires from the army and comes home with the Gurkha who, though leading a retired life has decided to assist the colonel. The rest is a long narrative of how the vigilante with his Man Friday, the Gurkha, brings mayhem into the lives of the bad guys. Predictably, in the end, like a good Hindi movie, good triumphs over evil and all is well on heaven and earth.

Though the book is gripping, at least in the first half, the events seem almost entirely predictable. And this is what makes it disappointing. Like most Hindi movies, the characterization is the weakest thing about the book. Yes, the colonel is a crack Special Forces commando, trained and, as is obvious, licensed to kill. But a single man storming the bad guy’s hideout and single-handedly killing tens of crooks, each armed to the teeth is stretching it a bit far. Even the redoubtable 007 is assisted by the tremendous, futuristic gadgetry of Q to take on the bad guys alone.

It must be said that the author has tried to make the book topical, what with ISI, cross border sponsored terrorism, Islamic fundamentalists meeting in run down mosques etc. However the characters are too unidimensional and stereotypical. The psychopathic bad guy, the faithful Gurkha, the estranged wife who comes back and discovers the love she has for the hero, all behave entirely predictably. The narrative does not convey the tension that the plot demands and consequently one never gets into the grip of the story. Apart from this, there are also minor inconsistencies in the description. For instance, the Gurkha is said to be driving a Honda motorcycle on one page and a Yamaha on the next one! (Another parallel with Hindi movies) All in all, a book that disappoints since the theme has a lot of potential. I recommend going and seeing a good Hindi movie instead.